Panel 06: **The Arab spring and the Arab Christian Diaspora in Europe**

Thursday 17, 11-13, Aula 8

Convenors: **Alessia Melcangi** (University of Catania), **Georges Fahmi** (Canergie Middle East Center)

The Arab spring have had an important influence on the Arab Christian communities both in the Middle East and in Europe. Since 2011, a new wave of Christian migration has arrived to Europe. This new generation of Arab Christian migrants together with the older generation has been both influenced by the Arab spring and influential on its developments through their activities in European countries. The political science literature on Diasporas follow mainly the perspective of the diaspora movements that explores the relationship of the Diaspora with the political institutions of their homelands. The ambivalent or dual loyalty of the Diaspora became, therefore, a force in identity formation; the questions of identity and (mis)identification, as Arab Christians attempt to reconcile competing ethnic, religious, national and other identities represent the other face of the coin. In this view particular attention has to be paid to the religious, social, cultural, political and economic realities of specific host context impact and shape their new organizational structure. Do the host sociocultural, economic and political milieu impact on and shapes the nature, course and scope of Arab Christianities in diaspora? Is the church considered as an identity point of references, a loci for security as well as avenues for adapting into the host social, cultural and religious milieu? The objective of this panel is twofold: first to understand how the Arab spring has influenced the Arab Christian Diaspora in terms of activities and its inter-religious relations with the Arab Muslim communities, and to what extent the sectarian tension in the Middle East affect the relation between the Muslim and Christian migrants in Europe. Second, how the Arab Christian Diaspora has influenced the Arab spring by its activities in Europe or through its transnational connections with the Christian communities in its homeland. The panel will also try to understand the dynamics within the Arab Christian Diaspora itself. Who are the influential actors? What is the role of the different Arab Christian Churches? The Arab Christian elite living in Europe?

Paper givers:

1) **Lisa Paulsen Galal** (Roskilde University), *Escape, but from what? Struggle for belonging among Iraqi and Egyptian Christians in Denmark*

   In 2011 Egyptian Christians in Denmark demonstrated together with their Muslim compatriots in support for the Egyptian revolution. In 2014 they joined a protest demonstration together with Iraqi Christians against the persecution of Christians in Iraq. While such public events are relatively limited due to small numbers of Middle Eastern Christians in Denmark, they reflect the negotiations of complex identification and belonging. In Denmark, the first Egyptian Christians came as work migrants in the 1970s, while the Iraqi Christians since 1984 and until today have arrived as refugees. In Denmark they do not have to worry about their safety, and they have the rights to practice their religion freely. Yet, they encounter a majority that practice and identify as Christians in a completely different way, a non-anticipated presence of Arab Muslims in the public sphere

and debate, an experience of being racialised as Muslims, and a harsh anti-immigrant debate. In this paper, I explore the narratives and practices of belonging among Christian immigrants of Iraqi and Egyptian background in Denmark. How do a simultaneous experience of freedom and confinement contribute to their practices and identifications as Christians of Middle Eastern origin in Denmark? Based on transnational and diaspora studies I will explore how their strategies of resistance towards confinement are multi-directional and situational. The research is based on findings from ethnographic fieldwork carried out in 2014 and is part of a larger interdisciplinary project comparing migrant experiences of Middle Eastern Christian communities in the UK, Denmark and Sweden.

2) **Fiona McCallum** (University of St Andrews), *Family, Cultural, Emotional and Political Ties: Narratives of Middle Eastern Christian Migrants in UK on the Homeland*

Much of the literature on diaspora and migration presumes that migrants will continue to have attachment to their 'homeland', perceived as the ancestral country of origin. Using the case study of Middle East Christian migrants in the UK, this paper will explore what type of attachments exist and to what extent the country of origin is perceived as 'homeland'. Particular reference will be given to what impact the Arab Spring and connected developments such as the rise of Islamic State have had on these narratives. While acknowledging that the following categories often intertwine and can be held concurrently, the paper will discuss four types of belonging. Family ties appear significant and are often the reason given for physical links to the country of origin. Cultural ties include history, heritage, traditions which may be unique to the particular community or shared with other citizens of the country of origin, thus impacting on how 'homeland' is constructed. Emotional ties cover reasons given for attachment to the homeland due to birth, nationality, significance of the area etc and are often cited even when negative views are also held about the country of origin. Political ties are also important for some interviewees and include political participation and activism regarding the political situation of the country of origin whether in the Middle East or the UK. Using data from interviews, the paper will indicate the diversity of opinions relating to the Middle Eastern homeland and how these also relate to a sense of belonging to the country of residence – the UK. The paper uses material from over 50 semi-structured interviews and 6 focus groups with Christians of Egyptian and Iraqi origin which were conducted in 2014-15 in London and Scotland as part of the HERA-funded project 'Defining and Identifying Middle Eastern Christian Communities in Europe'.

3) **Andreas Schmoller** (University of Salzburg), *Translocated sectarianisation? Coptic and Syriac Identities in Austria after the end of the Middle East*

As we know it Sectarianisation has marked Christian minorities in the Middle East since the War in Syria and particularly since the rise of the so called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. This paper seeks to explore the impact of the events in the Middle East on Diaspora communities. First, based on fieldwork in Vienna it will study how the sectarian dynamic is tangible in Diaspora associations, group activism and transnational networks. Second, this paper addresses the question of how sectarianisation of conflict and violence affects personal identities of Diaspora Christians. Based on life story interviews and semi-structured

interviews conducted after the rise of IS in Iraq and Syria we analyse narratives of Coptic and Syriac Diaspora Christians and Syrian Christian refugees in Austria. Arguing that sectarian discourses are relevant in narratives of migration/refuge and integration into the host society the paper finally seeks to demonstrate how they operate within narrative strategies of positioning and thus the construction of identity. By demonstrating the uses made of sectarian discourses in a migration and diaspora context this approach generally engages in a better understanding of the diasporic condition of Middle Eastern Christian.

4) **Donald A. Westbrook** (Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena), *Copts, e-Diasporas, and Dynamics of Identity Formation Post-Arab Spring: Three European Case Studies*

This paper examines some of the forces by which Copts outside Egypt have negotiated and articulated their personal, institutional, and profoundly hybridized religious and social identities since the Arab Spring. The central thesis is that globalization in the 20th and 21th centuries, in particular the rise of social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), have fostered and enhanced Coptic self-identity in host countries where they might have otherwise become relatively more assimilated. This has resulted in what has been termed "digital diaspora" (Jennifer Brinkerhoff) or "electronic diaspora" (Saad Michael Saad and Donald Westbrook) communities, which function to collapse traditional nation-state boundaries while at the same time providing virtual territorial gains for Copts who have been historically subject to marginalization and persecution within their native Egypt. These electronic communities have been initiated and nurtured by lay and clerical Copts alike, and are all the more significant in the wake of the Arab Spring. They provide models for community building and identity preservation that are of comparative value for other Middle Eastern Christian diasporic communities. The following case studies are examined and analyzed in their European socio-political religious contexts: (1) Coptic World (www.copticworld.org), which has an especially strong and cohesive international Facebook presence (https://www.facebook.com/copticworld), (2) online Coptic television programming that gives voice to European activist Copts (e.g. Coptic TV, Aghapy TV, and Logos TV), and (3) the social media presence of ecclesiastical opinion leaders (for instance Bishop Angaelos in the UK)

5) **Georges Fahmi** (Carnegie Middle East Center), *The Church and the Arab spring: the cases of Egypt and Syria*

During the second half of the 20th century, religious institutions and ideas became forces for democratization across a wide variety of traditions and societies around the globe, surprising many researchers. According to Samuel Huntington, "if it were not for the changes within the Catholic church and the resulting actions of the church against authoritarianism, fewer third wave transitions to democracy would have occurred and many that did occur would have occurred later" (Huntington 1991: 85). However, the leadership of the Christian churches in both Egypt and Syria have decided to support the autocratic regimes against the popular uprisings calling for freedom and dignity that swept the Arab region since 2011. This paper seeks to understand the attitudes of the leadership of the Church in both countries, and why have they decided to stand with authoritarianism. To answer this

question, the paper follows the New Institutionalism approach that emphasizes the ways in which an organization's environments, including cultural environment, shape its strategies. The paper argues that the material and ideational interests of the Church in both countries have shaped their political reactions to the Arab spring.